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CBC Newsletter

for members of the Carolina Bird Club, Inc., ornithological society of the Carolinas

Volume 52 October 2006 Number 5

Boating the NC Birding Trail

By Ginger Travis

When the godmother of the NC Birding Trail e-mailed an invitation to paddle some eastern streams that will be stops on the trail, I couldn't hit the reply button fast enough. Yes, yes, yes!

The NC Birding Trail is designed to increase nature-based tourism in North Carolina, following the example of birding trails in other states, notably Texas – and that's all I knew about it until this trip down east.

Our purpose was some on-the-ground research by Lena Gallitano, who was preparing to write descriptions of 20 trail sites out of the 102 selected in the coastal plain. Lena is the birding trail's volunteer extraordinaire. She was present at the creation three years ago and has worked on the trail's development ever since. (This spring Lena received a Governor's Award from the N.C. Wildlife Federation for her work.) The NC trail is now almost one-third complete, with the piedmont and mountains still to go.

The coastal plain birding trail sites include 4 streams north of the Albemarle Sound that also happen to be designated as NC paddling trails – and these were our destination:

- the upper Perquimans River (north of Hwy. 37 at Belvidere),
- Mill Creek (off the lower Perquimans just east of Hertford),
- Bennett's Millpond (west side of Hwy. 32 northwest of Edenton), and
- Warwick and Catherine Creeks (at SR 1232 on the Chowan Co./Gates Co. line).

So on June 19 in Raleigh, we tied our kayaks on top of Lena's Jeep and hopped on Hwy. 64 east. Lena would be choosing landmarks and recording mileages to launch sites, as well as taking note of attractions near the birding trail to publicize – like the incredibly cool replica of a colonial-era workboat known as a periauger, which is moored in Hertford. (John Lawson mentioned a periauger in his travels through North Carolina 300 years ago.) I had hardly any responsibilities on our trip except to look for birds and helpfully point out places to buy snacks. (My bumper sticker will read: "I brake for Cape Cod potato chips!")

Most Albemarle streams are blackwater, arising in the coastal plain and acquiring their strong tea-color from tannins in decaying organic matter. Two of the rivers we paddled or walked along – the Perquimans and the Pasquotank – flow south out of the Great Dismal Swamp. These blackwater streams are really a delight to paddle.

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Boating the NC Birding Trail (continued)

They don't carry the heavy sediment loads of piedmont brownwater rivers. Where the banks are low and swampy, they're lined with cypress and tupelo. Trees dangle Spanish moss or bristle with resurrection fern. Flowering plants crowd the stream edges: wild azalea, swamp rose, titi, buttonbush, lizard's tail, pickerel weed, and spatter dock.

For birding the best time to paddle here is probably the first two weeks of May. Yet Lena and I did OK on our late-June trip. A few voices seemed to be missing – gnatcatchers and tanagers – but we still heard plenty of singers, even during hot afternoons.

The most constant vocalist, on every blackwater stream and at any time of day, was the Prothonotary Warbler. On the upper Perquimans River we saw a pair of Prothonotaries at their nest hole in a rotting stump at the water's edge. For paddlers, this gorgeous species is easy to approach. We often heard Red-shouldered Hawks screaming and found one nest in a cypress on the Perquimans. Other common birds were Barred Owl, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Wood Thrush, Great Crested Flycatcher, Acadian Flycatcher, Common Grackle, Red-eyed, White-eyed, and Yellow-throated Vireo, Carolina Chickadee, Carolina Wren, Pileated, Red-bellied, and Downy Woodpecker, White-breasted Nuthatch, Green Heron, and Great Blue Heron. Where the tree canopy was separated by wide-open spaces (Bennett's Millpond and the lower Perquimans at Hertford) we also heard Yellow-throated Warblers singing and saw Ospreys.

Misses: We never heard a Swainson's Warbler despite seeing a lot of good-looking shrubby habitat (particularly on Warwick and Catherine Creeks). And if the Great Dismal Swamp holds Black-throated Green and Worm-eating Warblers, we didn't hear them on our brief, late-afternoon stop at the Hwy. 17 welcome center alongside the Dismal Swamp Canal.

Our best find by far was Anhinga at Bennett's Millpond – the only place we saw this species and probably right at the north edge of its range. We figured the birds were nesting somewhere on the millpond. We found at least two cypress trees at Bennett's that held active Great Blue Heron nests, and we saw Anhingas flying around and around these trees or perching near them. Bennett's Millpond looks a lot like the more famous Merchants Millpond in Gates Co. but feels less remote and lacks the alligators (we think!) that are said to inhabit Merchants.

So why make a special effort to bird these coastal-plain paddling trails?

Lena Gallitano

I think the most compelling reason is the privilege of entering a remote world that most of us only glimpse from a passing car – a world that we imagine as foreign and a little frightening: dark water and tangled woods, snakes and black bears, and the unknown lurking around every river bend. The truth is that blackwater swamps are very beautiful and mostly benign. The easiest way to enter this world is by boat. Yet there are a few places where birders can go on foot. Lena and I checked out two wonderful boardwalks – both on the NC Birding Trail – that give access to blackwater: a 100-yard boardwalk on Pembroke Creek at the Edenton Fish Hatchery and a magnificent half-mile boardwalk behind the College of Albemarle at Elizabeth City. A 3-mile walking trail has been developed at the Great Dismal Swamp's NC welcome center. (Elsewhere in the Albemarle region there are a couple of noteworthy boardwalks along Hwy. 64: one at the Scuppernong River in Columbia and another down a trail at Buffalo City in the Alligator River NWR.)

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REFLECTIONS ON THE GREAT WESTERN SAMPLER

Lucy Quintilliano

Editor's Note: Members of the CBC visited sites along and east of the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains the last week in May 2006. Lucy Quintilliano, a trip participant, shares her thoughts on a wonderful excursion.

This CBC bonus trip certainly was aptly named. It was a great trip in so many ways, and during our 2,100 mile trek through Colorado, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wyoming we sampled more habitat extremes than I realized existed in just four states. At the top of Mt Evans (elevation 14,270 ft) we experienced lack of oxygen, wind gusts of 50+ mph, wind-chill in the 20s and snow flurries. This was just a few days after walking through the sage brush and cacti of the Pawnee, Buffalo Gap and Thunder Basin National Grasslands. Several National Parks (Badlands, Black Hills, Devil's Tower, Wind Cave, and Mt. Rushmore) added to the diversity of habitat we visited.

As we all know, diverse habitat means a wider variety of birds. Our bird checklist total was 174 (34 life birds for me). High on my list of favorite moments is the two encounters with Mountain Plover, first in Pawnee National Grassland then again in Thunder Basin. And it is hard to beat watching two White-tailed Ptarmigan at the summit of Trail Ridge Road in Rocky Mountain National Park.

White-tailed Ptarmigan
Stephen Harris

After we stopped for a Short-eared Owl perched on a fencepost beside the highway at Thunder Basin, the bird flew along side us as we pulled away. When a second owl appeared, we were treated to an encounter which was either a territorial battle or a mating ritual – sometimes it is hard to tell the difference!

John Ennis

Then there were the dippers. A total of 5 plus a nest full of hatchlings under a footbridge we had just crossed. We watched quietly from a respectable distance as mama dipper returned to the nest several times.

Other personal favorites included the McCown's and Chestnut-collared Longspurs, Lark Buntings, Burrowing Owls, Golden Eagles, Northern Goshawks, Prairie Falcons, Williamson's Sapsuckers, Steller's Jays, and Green-tailed Towhee.

The 20+ species of mammals and reptiles were equally exciting. The Prairie Rattlesnake certainly got our attention. We watched a mother coyote with six pups feeding at Rocky Mountain National Park. We saw countless prairie dogs, a bobcat, bighorn sheep, bison, elk, pronghorn antelope and mountain goat.

The trip was challenging. We were up by 4 a.m. most mornings and real meals were the exception - we snacked on cereal bars, fruit and junk food more often than not. But I feel sure that everyone felt the experience was well worth the effort!

Birding Trail (continued)

A nonbirding reason – if you need one – to visit the north side of the Albemarle Sound is the long history of European settlement. Near Hertford, the Newbold-White House is believed to be the oldest existing building in North Carolina. And the surrounding countryside looks more like Virginia than NC – very flat sandy fields of peanuts and cotton, with some architecturally interesting farmhouses. People still live on those farms, too – it's not all corporate yet.

For more information on the NC Birding Trail, see www.ncbirdingtrail.org. To learn about coastal-plain paddling trails in North Carolina, you can visit several Web sites by Googling "NC coastal plain paddling trails." (Maps exist on the Web and on paper, but printed maps are said to be in short supply.) Paul Ferguson's excellent book, "Paddling Eastern North Carolina" is helpful. And a great way to get started birding the Albemarle region by boat is to sign up for guided paddling trips offered at Wings over Water for destinations like the Palmetto Peartree Preserve and the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge. The outfitter supplies the boat, and all you have to do is show up.

After you've been out on blackwater, you might consider a kayak as essential to birding as your binoculars – and a lot more fun than a spotting scope!

Keep up to date with Carolina Bird Club happenings at www.carolinabirdclub.org!

Wings Over Water Returns to the Outer Banks!

The Carolina Bird Club is proud to co-sponsor the 2006 Wings Over Water Wildlife Festival. This year's festival, headquartered on North Carolina's northern Outer Banks, takes place November 7 through November 12. More than 75 individual field trips or programs provide a variety of wildlife viewing and cultural opportunities.

Imagine birding the normally inaccessible South Pond at Pea Island NWR, often one of North Carolina's best shorebird locations! Maybe a relaxing paddle through an eastern cypress swamps is more your speed? Visitors can enjoy both, as well as decoy carving workshops, shorebird identification classes, "ghost" tours, and more.

Have you wanted to hear the mystical "double rap" of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker or see vintage photographs from the 1930's, previously considered the last evidence of the regal bird's existence in the United States? Ken Rosenberg, director of Conservation Science at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, will discus the recent reports of Ivory-billed Woodpecker sightings in Arkansas at Friday's keynote presentation.

Enjoy all of this and more on the beautiful Outer Banks of North Carolina and adjacent Down East counties. For registration information, field trip descriptions, and more, visit the Wings Over Water website at www.wingsoverwater.org

New Members

Mark Armstrong
Seymour, TN

Franne and Andy Ballin
Sanford, NC

Josh Craig
Wake Forest, NC

Curtis and Bonnie Dykstra
Washington, NC

Julia Graz
Apex, NC

Maria Lauricella
Camden, SC

Kenneth Lusk
Hendersonville, NC

Robert Melone
Apex, NC

Tara O'Leary
Winston-Salem, NC

Joanne Rittenberg
Wilmette, IL

Michael Tate
Charleston, SC

Louis & Cindy Womble
Woodruff, SC

Deceased Member

Hartsell Cash
Winston-Salem, NC

H. Douglas Pratt

The Grudge Bird

By John Ennis

Sometimes it just becomes personal. I have looked for a bird a number of times, even one described by others as a "sure thing" and could not find it. I call them "grudge birds". I have a grudge and maybe it is mutual.

I missed the Short-eared Owl many times, arriving sometimes within five minutes of someone else having seen it. In February 2005, while on a Mid-Atlantic winter trip, a friend arranged to meet me at the Port Mahon marshes on the Delaware Shore. Here the owl was supposed to be one of those sure things.

That morning, I birded the Cape May area and took the ferry across to Ocean City and the Delaware Shore. It was a dark and stormy day…thirty-five degrees, a 35-knot Northeast wind off the Atlantic, and featuring sideways driven rain that included a smidgen of sleet. I was only mildly successful in scanning inlets with my scope by hiding behind bridge abutments.

I was to meet my host in late afternoon; however, the weather was so bad, I called him at his office and called off the trip. Since I already had a hotel reservation for Dover, I tried for the owl anyway. Fortunately, just after dark, the rain stopped and conditions improved enough to give me hope.

I birded for close to two hours with no luck. There were numerous Northern Harriers working the fields plus an American Bittern flyover. The owls could have showed like those birds and, when they did not, I took it personally. Enough is enough! I officially placed the owl on my grudge bird list.

Fast forwarding past a few more failed attempts, I finally scored in mid-February 2006 at Alligator River NWR. A ranger told me a Short-eared Owl had been seen the previous afternoon just south of the helipad so I staked out that area.

As the sun set, the high wind died down leaving no sound except for birds. I could hear the ducks and geese twittering on my right, the bubbling conversations of swans on my left, and occasionally the silence was broken by a mallard squawking to the high heaven.

With just a faint rosy smudge remaining of the sunset, I heard the first owl. The unmistakable, multi-note screech was just in front of me. He sounded off four times and I still could not see him.

Finally, I saw flashes of two owls. Not a good look. I was hiding in the shadows of my SUV so I took a few steps closer to the canal to try to get a better look.

Suddenly, a blood-curdling scream pierced the silence – an unearthly sound! I had interrupted an owl's dinner, an owl I never saw. As I left, I looked up into the crisp, cloudless night to see Orion and a billion of his buddies winking at me – or were they grinning over how high I can jump when startled?

I returned the following morning to try to photograph the owls. I stood just off the road and, in a few minutes, the first owl sounded off. I heard it several times before it was light enough for me to see the silhouettes of two owls.

As it grew lighter, I counted four owls flying in small circles in an fashion that suggested cooperative hunting – barking to each other with a one-note call. Another birder described their flight as "flappity like a big moth". I definitely agree!

Just as the light was improving enough photograph the birds, a car drove up and, with the engine still running, the passenger asked if I could tell them where the owls were being seen. I told them they had arrived and to turn the engine off and get out.

Unfortunately, the disturbed owls' circles continued to shift to the west and then they were gone. I bit my tongue and did not tell the other birders what I thought of missing the owl picture due to their arrival.

Like many of you, I have noted that when I finally see a grudge bird, getting the next one is much easier. Like priming the pump!

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Ivory-billed Woodpecker Program

On Saturday, September 30, at 6:30 p.m., at the Visitors/Environmental Education Center at Goose Creek State Park (North Carolina) there will be a program by Dr. Karen Baldwin entitled: *The Ivory-billed Woodpecker, Legend or Reality?* Dr. Karen Baldwin, birder and folklore teacher at East Carolina University, will present a power- point program on the ecology and history of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker with emphasis on the presumed extinction and recent search for and "rediscovery" of this mysterious and majestic bird. Following the presentation will be a brief meeting of the newly revived Goose Creek Bird Club to announce upcoming birding trips.

Contact Ernest Marshall for more information at marshalle@ecu.edu.

Goose Creek State Park is approximately ten miles east of Washington, NC on the north shore of the Pamlico River.

Mark your calendars for the Carolina Bird Club Winter Meeting!

Susan Campbell

The 2007 CBC winter meeting is scheduled to be held on the Outer Banks of North Carolina January 26-28. Based in Nags Head, the meeting offers a wide variety of half and full-day field trips. Pea Island, Alligator River and Mattamuskeet Wildlife Refuges will certainly be popular destinations, and ducks, sparrows and wintering warblers should all be plentiful.

Brain Patteson will offer two all day pelagic trips. There will be a Friday (with no weather date) and Saturday (Sunday weather date) trip. Cost is $135/person with a limit of 20 people per trip. The departure point, possibly Wanchese or Hatteras, will be announced prior to the trip based on the weather. To reserve a space, send payment directly to: Brian Patteson, PO Box 772, Hatteras, NC 27943. More information about Brian's trips can be found at: http://www.seabirding.com/

Dr. Ted Simons, professor at North Carolina State University will be our speaker on Friday evening. He will present *10 years of American Oystercatcher Research on the Outer Banks of North Carolina.* Ted will outline the findings relating to oystercatchers and the implications for conservation and management on the seashore. On Saturday evening, Dr. Stephen Dinsmore from Iowa State University presents *Prairie Ghosts - Mountain Plovers in the Great Plains*. Many of you may remember that Steve conducted his Master's research through NCSU in the early 1990s on Sanderlings along the Outer Banks.

Full details including field trip descriptions, schedule, and lodging information will be printed in the November issue of the newsletter.

Hope to see you there!

The Grudge Bird (continued)

About a month later, on a business trip to Appleton, Wisconsin, I tried for Short-eared Owls at a location recommended by local birders - the observation deck at Van Patten Road in the Mack Wildlife Area.

In the fifteen minutes just after sunset, I saw six owls. I watched the first three plow into the snow. There must be a good supply of voles close to the deck!

I was able to take only one picture before my auto focus and image stabilization shut down due to low light. It is just a smudge; however, you can see the owl's head as it sat in the snow facing me. Regardless, I am very proud of that picture!

In late May, I was blessed with another Short-eared Owl experience. On the Carolina Bird Club western trip, while driving through Thunder Basin National Grassland in Wyoming, one of my riders spotted an owl flying parallel us. It was quickly joined by its mate and we watched as they hunted. One even perched for a while on a fence post. When they noticed we had stopped for photos, the owls slipped away as quickly as they appeared, leaving me again without a picture.

No problem! At least the grudge is gone!

Carolina Bird Club Fall Meeting—September 29-October 1
Savannah, Georgia

Hopefully you are already signed up to attend the fall 2006 meeting of the Carolina Bird Club in beautiful Savannah, Georgia. Southern hospitality at its finest, Savannah promises to be a birdy and culturally exciting host city for this fall's meeting.

Friday and Saturday evening speakers have been announced, and the Club is proud to have Sidney Maddock and Adam Kent present programs.

Sidney Maddock's Friday evening program on the Piping Plover showcases his work with the endearing and sometimes controversial shorebird. From the coasts of both Carolinas to the islands of the Bahamas, Sidney's presentation focuses on the plover's behaviors, as well as conservation challenges in the Carolinas.

Saturday evening features Adam Kent, who earned Master's degrees from the University of Florida in both Natural Resource Conservation and in Education. Since 1983 he led nature tours to Costa Rica, Canada, Mexico and the Amazon, as well as within the U.S., and his experiences living in and traveling throughout Latin America, Europe and Asia have equipped him with a broad understanding of ecological principles, a keen sense of humor and an ability to relate to people of all ages and nationalities.

Adam has been especially fascinated with birds his whole life. In addition to conducting bird surveys in Florida for more than 20 years, Adam wrote a guide to the shorebirds of Baja California, co-authored a paper about birds of the Lake Titicaca region of Bolivia, and reviewed A Birder's Guide to Alaska for the Journal of Field Ornithology. Most notably, recordings he made in 1991 in southern Mexico led to the description of a new species of bird, the Nava's Wren.

CBC Savannah Meeting Registration Form

Name (s) _____

Address _____City _____State _____ Zip _____

Day Phone _____ Evening Phone _____Email _____

_____Update my membership record with this address information. Remember to mail your membership renewals!

Friday field trip choices # _____/_____ Saturday field trip choices # _____/_____
AM PM AM PM

Enclosed is my check for _____member $15) registration(s), _____nonmember ($20) registration (s). My total is $ _____for the above registrations. Meeting registration at the door cost $25.

Club policy requires all field trip participants to comply with the field trips leader's assessment and requests concerning the physical ability of each participant to make or complete the trip.

I release and discharge (and will not make a claim against) Carolina Bird Club for injury, death, or property damage arising from my participation at this meeting and Club field trips. This release of liability is entered into on behalf of all members of my family, including all minors accompanying me. I certify that I am the parent or legal guardian of any such minors and that I am over 18 years of age.

Signature_____Date_____Signature_____Date _____

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Upcoming CBC Meetings

Nags Head, NC January 26-28, 2007
Flat Rock, NC May 18 - 20, 2007

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